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BY- DAVIS, RICHARD H.

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RICHARD H. DAVIS
CHICAGO, ILLINOIS

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Accrediting Technical-Vocational Programs

THE Commission on Colleges and Universities is currently discussing the problem of evaluating vocational and technical programs within institutions, and at the present time, all the issues have not been resolved and a definitive solution reached.

The question is: What problems does the Commission foresee in the evaluation of vocational and technical programs? These problems are the same regardless of the institutional setting—a comprehensive community college, a technical institute, or an area vocational-technical school.

There is no question that a need exists for vocational and technical education in the North Central area, and the Association, I believe, is confident concerning its development. Certainly, in view of the appropriations by Congress and the widespread interest in the 19-state area for this type of education, the issue is not related to the development of these programs since their development seems assured.

Traditional Requirements

There is one area that can be dismissed from present discussions. One requirement for membership in the North Central Association is that an institution must be chartered or must operate on a not-for-profit basis. This is a traditional requirement in the Commission, and as the statements of policy develop, there is every reason to believe that this requirement will continue to hold for all institutions

considering membership in the Association.

Another traditional requirement for Association membership is that the institution must award an authorized degree upon completion of a program of study. The degree-granting status of applying institutions which offer vocational and technical programs is unlikely to present any major problems. Junior colleges already grant the Associate of Arts degree in a variety of areas, some of which encompass technical programs. Technical institutes are likely to include the Associate degree since professional groups, such as engineers, interested in technical education insist upon awarding the Associate degree to those students who successfully complete recognized programs. Vocational schools also usually include in their curriculums programs which result in awarding the Associate degree.

While the degree-granting status of applying institutions probably will not develop as a major problem in the development of accrediting procedures for institutions offering technical and vocational education, this does not mean that all programs will result in the awarding of the Associate degree. There will be many programs of study which, because of duration or purpose, will result in a certificate or diploma rather than the collegiate degree. However, the institution offering such programs must be a degree-granting institution.

Evaluating Programs

The evaluation of vocational and technical programs is not an insoluble problem

Dr. DAVIS is Assistant Secretary of the NCA Commission on Colleges and Universities.

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from the point of view of the Commission. While it is necessary for NCA consultants and examiners to give more attention to expanding technical and vocational programs of various types, this does not imply that a specialist in each area need be sent to an institution undergoing an evaluation by the Commission.

At the present time we do not have sufficient personnel to evaluate these programs, but through the Consultant-Examiner Associate Program we are recruiting and training experienced and competent administrators and faculty members. For those institutions which offer a wide variety of technical and vocational programs, as well as college parallel programs, examining teams will be constituted which can evaluate the total institution.

The Commission does not propose to evaluate each specific program at an institution; however, examiners and consultants who are knowledgeable about the programs offered and empathetic with the educational task of the applying institution will be sent to make the judgments about the quality of the institution.

General Education Requirement

The question of general education is the most difficult problem with respect to vocational schools, technical institutes, and junior colleges offering comprehensive programs including technical-vocational programs. Historically, the Commission has been greatly concerned with the development of general education in its member colleges and universities. Some spokesmen for technical and vocational education are unsympathetic to the notion of general education in these types of programs. However, there is much support for including general education in these programs. Grant Venn, the author of *Man, Education, and Work*,¹ stated the following on this subject:

The high degree of specialization found in many

¹ Venn, Grant, *Man, Education, and Work* (Washington, D. C., American Council on Education, 1964), p. 32.

present vocational and technical curricula appears to be misguided. High school students in the federally supported vocational trades and industry program, for example, must spend a minimum of 50 per cent of their time in shop work alone. In many technical curricula only 10 per cent or less of the school time is allotted to general education subjects. Indeed, the difficulty of placing young people in jobs today, with the premium going to the person who can step into the job with the least amount of additional company instructional time, seems to act as an inducement to vocational and technical schools to concentrate on the expertise needed for nearby job openings. These schools pride themselves on how close their shop facilities duplicate real job conditions, and many of them do have excellent first-job placement records for their graduates. But this does not necessarily mean that the school has given the graduate the education he may really need. What is called for is more and better occupational education, to be sure, but occupational education on a more general basis—teaching certain basic skills, of course, but also devoting more time to the development of broader technical understanding of communication and computational abilities, and of an appreciation of civic, cultural, and leisure activities.

The effect of concentrating on skill development without sufficient emphasis on general education is not unrelated to the difficulties that have been experienced in the retraining programs for unskilled workers. Many of the retraining programs have been unsuccessful because prior training has been too narrowly conceived and has omitted the concerns for a foundation which would permit these individuals to learn new skills in a changing technological society. In other words, many unskilled, unemployed workers, even after completing a retraining program, lack the ability to read and write at a level sufficient to master required new skills which would help keep them productive members of a changing society.

The inclusion of general education in technical-vocational curriculums may result, of course, in extending certificate and degree programs beyond the usual two-year period. The objectives of the particular vocational or technical program, including the general education, should indicate the length of study required, and there is no reason to believe that all programs ought to be set arbitrarily at no longer than two years. Many programs

require less than two years to complete and some like the recommended 72 to 75 semester hour programs discussed by the American Society for Engineering Education in its publication, *Characteristics of Excellence in Engineering Technology Education*, will probably take longer than two years to complete. The Commission has, therefore, refrained from stating the precise nature of general education programs in terms of number of semester hours or subject matter to be included.

General Education as Integral Part of Vocational-Technical Programs

The Commission believes that general education ought to be related to the objectives of the total program, that students should become acquainted with the major areas of knowledge, and that students should become aware of the basic concepts and ideas in these areas.

Certainly the amount of general education will vary within different technical and vocational curriculums according to the length of study and the expectations held for the student both at the time of enrollment and in view of the role he is to play upon completion of the new program.

Fundamentally, the Commission believes that there must be a genuine commitment to general education on the part of those involved in vocational and technical programs. Only when general education has the same degree of support as the technical or vocational curriculums will it become a viable part of any program.

We are not speaking of general education similar to the university parallel programs commonly found in junior colleges, but a general education program which is unique to the development of students in the vocational and technological fields. It may not be appropriate to require students to participate in college parallel general education classes.

What is needed are courses and—more importantly—a program which serves the objectives of the technical and vocational student. General education programs in technical institutes and vocational schools

should remain wide in scope and be of high quality. These conditions seem to be necessary in order to prevent its defeat as a viable part of the total program.

Technical and vocational programs often appear to be rather rigorous in their expectations of students, and the same rigor should exist in the general education courses. This would require relating the appropriate concepts found within subjects or disciplines encompassed by general educational to the interests, abilities, and maturity of students in the vocational-technical areas.

For example, it is probably quite inappropriate for a course in general psychology to be required of all students in technical and vocational programs; at least the general psychology that would appear in a college parallel curriculum. There are, however, a number of concepts in psychology which could be of significant value in helping technical and vocational students understand themselves in relationship to their social and occupational setting.

Another example might be drawn from a course in economics. Rather than offering a survey of the somewhat abstract concepts related to the discipline, emphasis would be placed upon selection of principles and concepts uniquely related to technical and vocational programs. A primary emphasis might be upon economic growth and its relationship to resources, productivity, investment, and the like. These students could also come to understand the quickening tempo of technological innovation and the contributions of trades and technology to the gross national product.

The Commission's concerns for both the nature of the technical and vocational programs and the strong commitment to general education are related to the ability of the vocational school, technical institute, or comprehensive junior college to provide the student not only with sufficient skills but also with a perceptive sensitivity to his social and industrial environment. This would help insure the

ability of graduates of certificate and degree programs to enter occupations at the level for which they have been trained and to progress to the fullest extent of their capabilities. Although the student may secure the job without general education, his opportunity for advancement is severely limited, and he is likely to become "unskilled" in this rapidly changing technological society.

Unique Faculty Required

The implementation of this total curriculum—technical and vocational programs of study and general education—requires a rather unique faculty. The technical institute faculty needs a thorough knowledge of the principles and laws of science directly related to or indirectly implied by the occupational areas for which an institution proposes to prepare students. Moreover, in addition to proficiency in these skills, the faculty must be completely knowledgeable about the equipment related to the vocational-technical programs. They need to maintain close ties with industry in order to remain knowledgeable about the newest advances in the technology of their respective areas.

The general education faculty must possess attributes uniquely appropriate to technical and vocational schools. A faculty member teaching general education programs must be somewhat knowledgeable about and sympathetic with technical and vocational programs so that he will be able to relate the appropriate principles and concepts in general education to these areas of study. Also, the general education faculty member must have enough depth

and background in the academic areas to select from the disciplines those concepts which are uniquely appropriate for students pursuing vocational and technical curriculums.

These programs will be expensive both in terms of the equipment needed for the specialized programs of study and the recruitment of a qualified faculty. But above all, throughout the institution, there needs to be a high commitment to the place and function of general education in the vocational schools, technical institutes, and community colleges.

In conclusion, it is important to state again that the Commission on Colleges and Universities has by no means solved all the problems relating to the evaluation and accreditation of vocational schools, technical institutes, or junior colleges which incorporate vocational and technical programs. However, it would be quite inappropriate for the Commission to put aside the general education requirement.

Technical institutes and vocational schools have only recently begun to apply for membership in the Association. During this period of development, the discussions should continue with respect to the nature and purposes of these kinds of institutions; their human, financial, and physical resources; and the development of their particular programs of study.

We encourage these institutions to enter into a discussion with the Association in order that the Commission's policies will be developed in an informed, realistic, and justifiable manner, and in turn, that these policies will result in the establishment of quality institutions offering technical and vocational programs.

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